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Macbeth, the Bloody Chef of Scotland

Red, scarlet, vermilion, crimson, ruby, maroon, cerise, cardinal, carmine, rufous, sanguine — *blood*. The life-sustaining fluid. A viscous river within, transporting all vital nourishment and excess waste. Honorable if sacrificed. Revengeful if spilt. Ambitious if boiled. Repeated forty-one times, making it the most common image in the “Scottish” play. “Blood will have blood” (3.4.123). The polluted ethicality, neurotic imagination, and onomatopoeic symbolism of William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* produces horrifying catharsis. Despite the homicidal tragedy contained in this allegory, it is poetically bloody but delightfully tedious. No other story artistically, yet truthfully, captures the dark side of Christian spirituality, as it relates to mental frailty and vulnerability. *Macbeth*, in any rendition of the play, naturally comes face-to-face with dynamic and disturbing themes within humanity: morality and integrity; demonology verses psychosis; and the most complex, free-will verses determinism. In the words of David Bevington, “Although he commits heinous deeds, Macbeth does not represent consummate evil; rather he is unforgettable because he is representatively human” (767).

The BBC’s ShakespearRe-told *Macbeth*, directed by Mark Brozel, places the tragic story in modern Scotland. Rather than a thane, Joe Macbeth (James McAvoy) is the head-chef, “the kitchen warrior,” “the cooking Braveheart” of a fancy, three-star restaurant, known for its carnivorous entrees. His bewitching wife, Ella Macbeth, is the manager and maitre d’. They are overworked and under-appreciated by the restaurant’s owner, Duncan Docherty, whom they murder. This, in combination with the prophecy of three garbage men (rather than witches), fuels

their bloody ambition. The prophecy declares that the restaurant will be promoted to three Michelin stars and that Joe will inherit everything. Billy (the character of Banquo) is Joe's best friend and kitchen colleague. After the head waiter, Peter Macduff, kills Joe Macbeth, the restaurant is bestowed to Malcolm, Duncan's son: amateur cook and vegetarian.

Despite the fact that this film does not use Shakespeare's rich language, the screenwriter, Peter Moffat, captures the essence of the Shakespearean text with thick symbolism and brilliant interpretation. Seagulls hover against dark clouds as a red garbage truck waits alone in an ocean of trash. Three scruffy men sit squashed in the claustrophobic cabin of the truck, each masticating his own gross sandwich. Instead of using the supernatural to define the characters and the plot of *Macbeth Re-Told*, Moffat uses pollution of the mind and heart. The opening scene, where the prophecy is made by the garbage men, sets this image.

Despite exhaustion, Joe and Ella Macbeth are in love and relatively light-hearted at the start of the film. Joe sings "Baby, I Love You," by The Ramones, before cutting up a pig's head in the kitchen, accentuating his love for his career and his wife. Ella sings "Mercedes Benz," by Janis Joplin, while applying lipstick in front of her mirror. Both musical pieces are bright and sunny compared to the oncoming darkness of the film. When the adoring couple commits a murder most foul, blood literally and metaphorically covers them both. Their love is polluted by guilt, depression, and madness. In the end, Joe's love and life drains from him like the pig he slit in his kitchen.

Even though Macbeth is the primary character in this play, his actions would have never come to pass if not for the dominance of his Machiavellian wife, Lady Macbeth. For a noblewoman, she has strong male traits, such as single-mindedness, dominance, political

ambition, and suppressing of emotion. Macbeth's allowance of his wife's control paints him in a feminine contrast (Knight 327). Her madness is ironic. She is the one who says, "These deeds must not be thought after these ways; so, it will make us mad" (2.2.37-38). However, it is her repression of the murder that leads her to madness, unlike Macbeth who constantly dwells on his sin and turns bitter. Macbeth "unpacks his heart in the words of a great poet" to release himself from the bondage of guilt, whereas Lady Macbeth does not (Ridley 73). Macbeth can avoid madness, but he does not escape the hardening of his heart. With each passing murder Macbeth becomes more a tyrant and less a warrior of valor. In the beginning Macbeth lacked "infirm of purpose" (2.2.56). Instead, he "acquired firmness of purpose by the wrong road and for the wrong end" which made him a "worse rather than better man" (73). In the end, both husband and wife become prisoners to their own sin.

However, one cannot help but wonder if Lady Macbeth becomes mad from repression or from demonic possession. *Macbeth Re-Told* describes Ella Macbeth's madness from the view of repression. Moffat takes Lady Macbeth's chilling tale of her dead baby (1.7.54-60) literally, but casts it as an accident rather than homicide. Ella and Joe Macbeth suffer the loss of their first child. For an unknown reason the baby had been born prematurely and died a few days later. Her repressed emotion about the death of her baby causes Ella to unravel into madness after she and Joe murder Duncan. The innocence of the untimely child brought Ella's wrongdoing to retribution by her own suicide.

On the other hand, according to popular belief, demon possession can only occur if a person invites evil spirits into the body. In the play, Lady Macbeth does this exact action by reciting, "Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here and fill me from the

“crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty” (1.5.40-43). Subsequently, Lady Macbeth displays behavior of demon possession. As quoted by Walter Clyde Curry, John Cassian deliberates, “It is clear that unclean spirits cannot make their way into those bodies they are going to seize upon, in any other way than by first taking possession of their minds and thoughts” (Curry 32). By openly inviting evil spirits to her, Lady Macbeth exposes her mind to the powerful forces of the demonic realm. Once the mind is under control, the body follows. The genius of the human mind is the gateway to the soul, which no other organism is endowed and only God has access. However, demonic influence, if welcomed, can utterly overwhelm the intellect of man, where the “vitality of the soul resides” (Curry 33). In the sense of asexual spirits, Lady Macbeth’s request is granted, she is unsexed by possession.

The three witches, also represented as female, provoke Macbeth toward evil by prophetic appeal. These “Weird Sisters” are both literal and symbolic of the demonic forces encroaching in Macbeth’s shadow. There is no doubt Shakespeare inserted these characters to represent Satan’s metaphysical realm of fallen angels. The real question is, why in the form of witches and not devils? According to Curry, dramatists deconstructed stage devils from evil connivers to pure comic effigy. In Shakespeare’s day, the prime characteristics of a devil (hoofs, horns, tails) were considered ludicrous. For this tragedy to be taken seriously as chaotic mess of spiritism and bloodshed, he needed to use witches. The witch-figure held the tragic belief of selling one’s soul to the devil (Curry 31). There is no comedy in this. If that be the case, then one could possibly conclude that Lady Macbeth is an intimate projection of the Weird Sisters within Macbeth’s proximity. However, I would not go so far as to say she is a witch herself, but merely a puppet used by the witches.

Shakespeare could be connecting the spirituality of his play to the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. Adam (Macbeth) is virtuous and blameless in the sight of God (Duncan). Eve (Lady Macbeth) is devoured by evil, which subsequently devours her husband, leading them both to death (Knight 330). The variance lies within the Satan figure (the Weird Sisters), who directly tempts Eve. In *Macbeth* the Weird Sisters directly tempt Macbeth (Adam), who then tells his wife. Nevertheless, Lady Macbeth is still tempted by the Satan figure because she does not seek evil until after her husband tells her of his prophetic encounter. As mentioned previously, she might even be an intimate projection of the Satan figure because of her feminine and spiritual ties to the Weird Sisters.

The play seems to balance a rhythm of courage and fear. Macbeth begins with good character, valor, bravery, and honor. He falls from the pedestal of beloved soldier to traitor, nearly overnight (Knight 125). Despite the medals Macbeth wears for Duncan, he undoubtedly loses his honor of warrior-hood immediately after the murder. Nonetheless, his Christian conscience, once intertwined with his warrior-hood, follows him to the end. Macbeth admired Duncan's integrity and virtue, despite his wife's opinion. The guilt of the murder is birthed by his Christian conscience. But to mask his self-humiliation, he keeps killing, systematically murdering his Christian conscience too. In the end, he is destroyed by his religion (Blits 60). Macbeth had a choice. He knew what to do and what not to do, but he ignored his better judgement.

Banquo is Macbeth's foil, moreover another voice of Christian conscience. When the seeds of "vaulting ambition" are planted within Macbeth by the witches, Banquo points out how illogical the circumstance was, "Have we eaten on the insane root that takes the reason

prisoner” (1.3.84-85). After the first prophecy came to pass, he knew the source of the witch’s information was the Devil himself (Fletcher 65). He then warns Macbeth with great wisdom, “Oftentimes to win us to our harm the instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray’s in deepest consequence” (1.3.123-126). If Macbeth had listened to his friend, and internalized his wisdom, he might have fought the temptation of regicide. Billy, in the Re-Told film, plays the role of supportive friend rather than conscience. For the most part, he is completely oblivious to Joe’s turmoil until Joe snaps at him. Like Banquo, Billy is meant to provide strength for Joe, but fails. Because of the prophecy, Billy’s children were a threat to Joe, so he murders his best friend out of jealousy.

After hearing the prophecy of his rise to power, Macbeth becomes hungry for the role even though the kingship is not his right, so he steals it through murder. He never truly owns the kingship he has attained because of his continual lust (Knight 129). Joe and Ella Macbeth suffer a lust for acknowledgement as well as for power. They are upset that Duncan gets all the publicity and power when they are responsible for his success. Blinded by her lust for gratitude, Ella encourages her husband to kill by using her bewitching elegance. Killing Duncan does not ease their workload, but it does grant them the “satisfaction” of fame and publicity.

To truly accentuate the reality of death, Shakespeare had to contrast this theme with life. What sustains life and sanity better than sleeping and eating? Macbeth and his wife killed these two habits when they murdered the king, leaving the dreadful couple to roam their prison in a “living death, without peaceful sleep or peaceful feeding” (Knight 134). Macbeth’s feeding is disrupted by the ghost of Banquo. Lady Macbeth sleepwalks and suffers a phobia of the dark. In this disturbed sleep she kills herself. The Re-Told *Macbeth* highlights these themes perfectly. Joe

prepares the hospitality of feasting and Ella delivers it with grace. Although the film is about food, it never shows Joe or Ella eating a meal. The only meal shown, he doesn't eat because of Billy's ghost. He also suffers sleeplessness from self-condemnation and from working eighteen hour, back-to-back shifts. His insomnia only increases after the murder when he asserts, "I will never sleep again." For that matter, Ella can only sleep with the lights on after the bloodshed, as if she was being haunted by the repression of her past.

Alongside the food analogy is the representation of milk in both the play and the film. The connotation of the word "milk" in the play is very ambiguous. It either denotes weakness or nourishment (Elliot 74). Both Lady Macbeth and Ella Macbeth criticize their husbands for being "too full of the milk of human kindness" (1.5.17). In this case, most likely referring to weakness. Throughout the film, Joe Macbeth progressively drinks milk from a beer-stocked fridge where Duncan's picture resides, almost as if Duncan was the strength behind Joe's kindness. As the plot thickens, Joe's consumption of milk curdles. At the start, (1) Joe drinks a bottle of wholesome milk from the fridge as normal. Just before the murder, (2) Joe grabs the milk from the back of the fridge only to drop it, cutting his own hand on broken glass. As Joe becomes increasingly psychotic from his guilt, (3) the milk on his lips turns to blood. He then has Duncan's picture removed. Furthermore, (4) Joe sits in a hallway and drinks milk mixed with vodka. Finally, after Billy's murder, Joe plans the future murder of Macduff (5) with a bottle of beer in his hand instead of milk, symbolizing the final ounce of the "milk of human kindness" has finally turned sour.

In association with the film's milk symbol, the text also emphasizes the spoiling of milk. Lady Macbeth, fearing her husband is too kind, requests evil spirits to turn her own "milk for

gall” (1.5.49) so that she can do the dirty deed in case Macbeth fails. In this case, milk is referred to as a nourishing substance that has turned poisonous. She then speaks of atrocities about dashing the brains out of a baby who suckles her (1.7.59), overtly emphasizing the corruption of innocence (Knight 143-144).

Both the text and the film surround Macbeth with specific animals that symbolize the unfolding tragedy. In the play, Shakespeare uses the image of an owl, or some sort of nocturnal bird. Macbeth is in the process of murder when his wife hears the owl shriek. Macbeth asks if she heard anything. She replies, “I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry” (2.2.16). The next morning, Macduff and Lennox report to the castle for the king. Lennox mentions the peculiar disturbances during the night, particularly “the obscure bird” that “clamored the livelong night” (2.3.59-60). According to Bevington, an obscure bird refers to the owl (785). Fittingly, Macbeth had been clamoring all night long with his wife about the murder. Lennox might have also referred to Macbeth’s shrieking like an owl. Either way, Macbeth was the bird of prey that night.

While chatting with Ross about the strange happenings, the Old Man reported a mighty falcon, soaring at the highest point, was uncommonly killed by an owl (2.4.12-13). This abnormal phenomenon strategically represents the murder of Duncan by the owl, Macbeth. Finally, after Macduff fled the country to raise an army, Lady Macduff cries to Ross, wondering why her husband would leave his family unprotected “against the owl,” Macbeth (4.2.8-11). A tragic mistake by Macduff, who later satisfies his revenge against his nemesis. The owl symbol personifies Macbeth’s growing reputation as the predacious king and the parasitic darkness of the spiritual realm that corrupts his intellect.

In *Re-Told*, Moffat uses the image of the pig the same way Shakespeare uses the owl. Moffat might have gotten this image from the Witches' opening scene of "killing swine" (1.3.2). In his interpretation, killing swine would be equivalent to killing Macbeth. Pigs are not only stereotyped with disgust, trash, odors, and sloth, but also with butcher shops. It is the butchery that characterizes Joe. Billy's murder is personified by Joe's phrase, "All *good* butchers are up by now." In the first kitchen scene, Joe trains his young chefs how to properly cut up a pig's head. In Joe's kitchen, the first rule is respect. That means respecting the slaughtered animal and the other chefs. In a word, respect equals no waste.

Upon butchering the pig, Joe gives respect to it by saying, "This animal was noble, highly intelligent, feeling. It died for us. Never forget that." How is a real pig any of these qualities? It isn't. However, Joe is. He is noble, highly intelligent, and feeling. The irony is, he is cutting up his own head, the head of a pig. The correlation is made perfectly clear by the tattoo of a severed pig's head on his arm. The butcher will be butchered. The restaurant is famous for pork entrees, representing little pieces of Joe chipped away unto platters as Duncan profits at his expense. Every chip means more lost respect for Duncan since Joe feels his talent and life is being wasted. In false security, Joe is told that pigs will fly before any harm would come to him. That night, Joe is killed and a helicopter of cops (a.k.a. pigs) hovers above Joe's restaurant.

Shakespeare's genius is properly displayed in the pages of *Macbeth* and the retelling of the film. His literary talents illuminate the threatening horror of sin that encroaches behind each and every human being. Peter Moffat's modern exposition displays the brilliant eeriness of psychosis and betrayal. The symbolism in these productions is thick and rife like blood dripping from a dagger. The themes remind us of the dangers of human ambition. The overwhelming

amount of death sets the gift of life in stark contrast. As Macbeth says, “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and thus is heard no more” (5.5.24-26). Life is a beautiful and fragile gift, if only we would cherish it.

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